

Social Learning Theory of Aggression

by Albert Bandura

"The massive threats to human welfare are generally brought about by deliberate acts. . . . It is the principled resort to aggression that is of greatest social concern but most ignored in psychological theorizing and research."

Differing conceptions of what constitutes aggression produce different lines of theorizing and research. Psychological theories of aggression have been largely concerned with individual physically injurious acts that are aversively motivated. In most of these accounts aggression is not only attributed to a narrow set of instigators, but the purposes it presumably serves are limited. Inflicting injury and destruction is considered to be satisfying in its own right and hence is the major aim of aggressive behavior.

In actuality, aggression is a multifaceted phenomenon that has many determinants and serves diverse purposes. Therefore, theoretical formulations couched in terms of frustrating instigators and injurious aims have limited explanatory power (5). A complete theory of aggression must be sufficiently broad in scope to encompass a large set of variables governing diverse facets of aggression, whether individual or collective, personal or institutionally sanctioned.

Aggression is generally defined as behavior that results in personal injury and physical destruction. Not all injurious and destructive acts are judged aggressive, however. Whether injurious behavior will be perceived as aggressive or not depends on subjective judgments of intentions and causality. The greater the attribution of personal responsibility and injurious intent to the harm-doer, the higher the likelihood that the behavior will be judged as aggressive (5, 53).

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There are few disagreements over the labeling of direct assaultive behavior that is performed with explicit intent to injure or destroy. But people ordinarily do not aggress in conspicuous direct ways that reveal causal responsibility and carry high risk of retaliation. Rather, they tend to harm and destroy in ways that diffuse or obscure responsibility for detrimental actions to reduce self-reproof and social reprisals. Most of the injurious consequences of major social concern are caused remotely, circuitously, and impersonally through social practices judged aggressive by the victims but not by those who benefit from them. Students of aggression examine direct assaultive behavior in minute detail, whereas remote circuitous acts, which produce widespread harm, receive comparatively little attention.

Disputes over the labeling of aggressive acts assume special significance in the case of collective behavior involving dissident and institutionally sanctioned aggression. Agencies of government are entrusted with considerable rewarding and coercive power. Either of these sources of power can be misused to produce detrimental social effects. Punitive and coercive means of control may be employed to maintain inequitable systems, to suppress legitimate dissent, and to victimize disadvantaged segments of society. People can similarly be harmed both physically and socially by arbitrary denial or discriminative administration of beneficial resources to which they are entitled.

People vary markedly in their perceptions of aggression for social control and for social change (14). The more advantaged citizenry tend to view even extreme levels of violence for control as lawful discharges of duty, whereas disadvantaged members regard such practices as expressions of institutional aggression. Conversely, aggression for social change, and even group protest without injury, is judged as violence by patriots of the system but not by dissidents. Thus, in conflicts of power, one person's violence is another person's benevolence. Whether a particular form of aggression is regarded as adaptive or destructive depends on who bears the consequences.

A complete theory of aggression must explain how aggressive patterns are developed, what provokes people to behave aggressively, and what sustains

such actions after they have been initiated. Figure 1 summarizes the determinants of these three aspects of aggression within the framework of social learning theory.

People are not born with preformed repertoires of aggressive behavior; they must learn them.

Some of the elementary forms of aggression can be perfected with minimal guidance, but most aggressive activities—whether dueling, military combat, or vengeful ridicule—entail intricate skills that require extensive learning.

Virtually all learning resulting from direct experience can also occur on a vicarious basis by observing the behavior of others and its consequences. The capacity to learn by observation enables organisms to acquire large, integrated patterns of behavior without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error. The abbreviation of the acquisition process through observational learning is vital for both development and survival.

Findings of numerous studies show that children can acquire entire repertoires of novel aggressive behavior from observing aggressive models, and retain such response patterns over extended periods (5, 32). In many instances the behavior being modeled is learned in essentially the same form. But models teach more general lessons as well. From observing the behavior of others, people can extract general tactics and strategies of behavior that enable them to go beyond what they have seen or heard. By synthesizing features of different modeled patterns into new amalgams, observers can evolve new forms of aggression.

In a modern society, aggressive styles of behavior may be adopted from three principal sources. One prominent origin is the aggression modeled and

ORIGINS OF AGGRESSION	INSTIGATORS OF AGGRESSION	REGULATORS OF AGGRESSION
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Figure 1: Schematic outline of the origins, instigators, and regulators of aggressive behavior in social learning theory

reinforced by family members. Studies of familial determinants of aggression show that parents who favor aggressive solutions to problems have children who tend to use similar aggressive tactics in dealing with others (11, 33).

The subculture in which people reside, and with which they have repeated contact, provides a second important source of aggression. Not surprisingly, the highest incidence of aggression is found in communities in which aggressive models abound and fighting prowess is regarded as a valued attribute (55, 70).

The third source of aggressive conduct is the abundant symbolic modeling provided by the mass media. The advent of television has greatly expanded the range of models available to a growing child. Both children and adults today have unlimited opportunities to learn the whole gamut of violent conduct from televised modeling within the comfort of their homes.

A considerable amount of research has been conducted in recent years on the effects of televised influences on social behavior. The findings show that exposure to televised violence can have at least four different effects on viewers: (1) it teaches aggressive styles of conduct, (2) it alters restraints over aggressive behavior, (3) it desensitizes and habituates people to violence, and (4) it shapes people's images of reality upon which they base many of their actions. Let us review briefly each of these effects.

Television is an effective tutor. Both laboratory and controlled field studies, in which young children and adolescents are repeatedly shown either violent or nonviolent fare, disclose that exposure to filmed violence shapes the form of aggression and typically increases interpersonal aggressiveness in everyday life (5, 38, 40, 48, 59, 60). Adults who pursue a life of crime improve their criminal skills by patterning their behavior after the ingenious styles portrayed in the mass media (31). Being an influential tutor, television can foster humanitarian qualities, as well as injurious conduct. Programs that portray positive attitudes and social behavior foster cooperativeness and sharing, and reduce interpersonal aggression (36).

*Another line of research has examined
how inhibitions over aggression are
affected by exposure to televised violence.*

There are several characteristics of televised presentations that tend to weaken people's restraints over behaving aggressively. Physical aggression is often shown to be the preferred solution to interpersonal conflicts. It is portrayed as acceptable, unsullied, and relatively successful. Superheroes do most of the killing. When good triumphs over evil by violent means, viewers are more strongly influenced than when aggressive conduct is not morally sanctioned by prestigious figures. In experimental tests adults generally behave more punitively after they have seen others act aggressively than if they have not been exposed to aggressive modeling. This is especially true if the modeled aggressive conduct is legitimized by social justifications (13).

Desensitization and habituation to violence are reflected in decreases in physiological reactions to repeated exposure to displays of violence. Heavy

viewers of television respond with less emotion to violence than do light viewers (18). In addition to emotional desensitization, violence viewing can create behavioral indifference to human aggression. In studies demonstrating the habituation effect, children who have had prior exposure to interpersonal violence are less likely to intervene in escalating aggression between children they are overseeing (24, 63, 64).

During the course of their daily lives, people have direct contact with only a small sector of the physical and social environment. In their daily routines they travel the same routes, visit the same places, see essentially the same group of friends and work associates. Consequently, people form impressions of the social realities with which they have little or no contact partly from televised representations of society. Because the world of television is heavily populated with villainous and unscrupulous people it can distort knowledge about the real world. Indeed, communications researchers have found that heavy viewers of television are less trustful of others and overestimate their chances of being criminally victimized more than do light viewers (29). Heavy viewers see the society at large as more dangerous regardless of their educational level, sex, age, and amount of newspaper reading.

Many of the misconceptions that people develop about certain occupations, nationalities, ethnic groups, sex roles, social roles, and other aspects of life are cultivated through modeling of stereotypes by the media. Too often their actions are based on such misconceptions.

Symbolic modeling plays an especially significant role in the shaping and rapid spread of collective aggression.

Social diffusion of new styles and tactics of aggression conforms to the generalized pattern of most other contagious activities: new behavior is introduced by a salient example, it spreads rapidly in a contagious fashion, and it then either stabilizes or is discarded depending on its functional value.

Modeled solutions to problems that achieve some success are not only adopted by people facing similar difficulties, but they tend to spread as well to other troublesome areas. The civil rights struggle, which itself was modeled after Gandhi's crusades of nonviolent resistance, in turn, provided the example for other protest campaigns aimed at eliminating injustices and undesired social practices. The model of collective protest is now widely used as a means of forcing change.

Airline hijacking provides another recent example of the rapid diffusion and decline of aggressive tactics. Air piracy was unheard of in the United States until an airliner was hijacked to Havana in 1960. Prior to that incident Cubans were hijacking planes to Miami. These incidents were followed by a wave of hijackings both in the United States and abroad, eventually involving 71 different countries. Just as aggressive strategies are widely modeled, so are the countermeasures that prove effective in controlling modeled aggression.

Modeling and reinforcement operate jointly in the social learning of aggression in everyday life. Styles of aggression are largely learned through observation, and refined through reinforced practice. The effects of these two determi-

nants on the form and incidence of aggression are graphically revealed in ethnographic reports of societies that pursue a warlike way of life and those that follow a pacific style. In cultures lacking aggressive models and devaluing injurious conduct, people live peaceably (1, 22, 37, 46, 66). In other societies that provide extensive training in aggression, attach prestige to it, and make its use functional, people spend a great deal of time threatening, fighting, maiming, and killing each other (12, 17, 26, 69).

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also how they are activated and channeled.*

It has been traditionally assumed that aggressive behavior is activated by an aggressive drive. According to the instinct doctrine, organisms are innately endowed with an aggressive drive that automatically builds up and must be discharged periodically through some form of aggressive behavior. Despite intensive study, researchers have been unable to find an inborn autonomous drive of this type.

For years, aggression was viewed as a product of frustration. In this conception, frustration generates an aggressive drive which, in turn, motivates aggressive behavior. Frustration replaced instinct as the activating source, but the two theories are much alike in their social implications. Since frustration is ever present, in both approaches people are continuously burdened with aggressive energy that must be drained from time to time.

The frustration-aggression theory was widely accepted until its limited explanatory value became apparent from growing evidence. Frustration has varied effects on behavior; aggression does not require frustration.

The diverse events subsumed under the omnibus term frustration do have one feature in common—they are all aversive. In social learning theory, rather than frustration generating an aggressive drive that is reducible only by injurious behavior, aversive stimulation produces a general state of emotional arousal that can facilitate any number of responses (see Figure 2).

The type of behavior elicited will depend on how the source of arousal is cognitively appraised, the modes of response learned for coping with stress, and

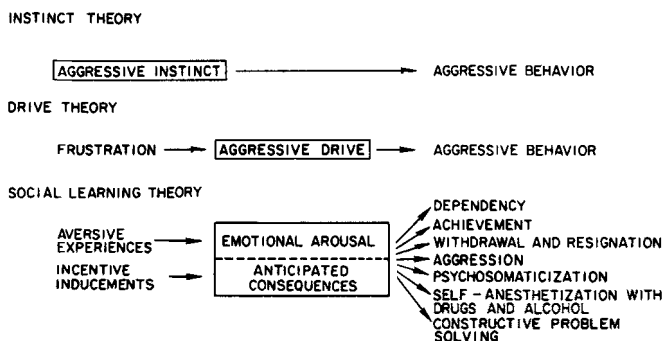


Figure 2: Schematization of alternative motivational analyses of aggression

their relative effectiveness. When distressed some people seek help and support; others increase achievement efforts; others display withdrawal and resignation; some aggress; others experience heightened somatic reactivity; still others anesthetize themselves against a miserable existence with drugs or alcohol; and most intensify constructive efforts to overcome the source of distress.

Several lines of evidence, reviewed in detail elsewhere (5), lend greater validity to the *arousal-prepotent response* formulation than to the *frustration-aggression* view. Different emotions appear to have a similar physiological state (2). The same physiological state can be experienced phenomenologically as different emotions, depending upon what people see as the incitements, and how they interpret them (34, 43). In individuals who are prone to behave aggressively, different sources of emotional arousal can heighten their aggression (52, 61).

In drive theories, the aroused aggressive drive presumably remains active until discharged by some form of aggression. Actually, anger arousal dissipates rapidly, but it can be easily regenerated on later occasions through rumination on anger-provoking incidents. By thinking about past insulting treatment, people can work themselves into a rage long after their emotional reactions have subsided.

Frustration or anger arousal is a facilitative, rather than a necessary, condition for aggression. Frustration tends to provoke aggression mainly in people who have learned to respond to aversive experiences with aggressive attitudes and conduct. Thus, after being frustrated, aggressively trained children behave more aggressively, whereas cooperatively trained children behave more cooperatively (21).

There exists a large body of evidence that painful treatment, deprivation or delay of rewards, personal insults, failure experience, and obstructions, all of which are aversive, do not have uniform behavioral effects (4). Some of these aversive antecedents convey injurious intent more clearly than others and therefore have greater aggression-provoking potential.

If one wished to provoke aggression, one way to do so would be simply to hit another person, who is likely to oblige with a counterattack. To the extent that counteraggression discourages further assaults it is reinforced by pain reduction and thereby assumes high functional value in social interactions.

Social interchanges are typically escalated into physical aggression by verbal threats and insults.

In analyzing dyadic interchanges of assault-prone individuals, Toch (65) found that humiliating affronts and threats to reputation and manly status emerged as major precipitants of violence. High sensitivity to devaluation was usually combined with deficient verbal skills for resolving disputes and restoring self-esteem without having to dispose of antagonists physically. The counterattacks evoked by physical assaults are probably instigated more by humiliation than by physical pain. Indeed, it is not uncommon for individuals, groups, and even nations, to pay heavy injury costs in efforts to "save face" by combat victory.

Aversive changes in the conditions of life can also provoke people to aggressive action. Explanations of collective aggression usually invoke impoverishment and discontent arising from privations as principal causal factors. However, since most impoverished people do not aggress, the view that discontent breeds violence requires qualification. This issue is well illustrated in interpretations of urban riots in ghetto areas. Despite condemnation of their degrading and exploitative conditions of life, comparatively few of the disadvantaged took active measures to force warranted changes. Even in cities that experienced civil disturbances, only a small percent of ghetto residents actively participated in the aggressive activities (39, 45, 54).

The critical question for social scientists to answer is not why some people who are subjected to aversive conditions aggress, but rather why a sizable majority of them acquiesce to dismal living conditions in the midst of affluent styles of life. To invoke the frustration-aggression hypothesis, as is commonly done, is to disregard the more striking evidence that severe privation generally produces feelings of hopelessness and massive apathy. People give up trying when they lack a sense of personal efficacy and no longer expect their efforts to produce any beneficial results in an environment that is unresponsive or is consistently punishing (8, 42).

Comparative studies indicate that discontent produces aggression not in those who have lost hope, but in the more successful members whose assertive efforts at social and economic betterment have been periodically reinforced. Consequently, they have some reason to expect that they can effect change by coercive action (16, 19).

More recent explanations of violent protest emphasize relative deprivation, rather than the actual level of aversive conditions, as the instigator of collective aggression.

In an analysis of conditions preceding major revolutions, Davies (20) reports that revolutions are most likely to occur when a period of social and economic advances that instills rising expectations is followed by a sharp reversal. People judge their present gains not only in relation to those they secured in the past; they also compare their lot in life with the benefits accruing to others (7). Inequities between observed and experienced outcomes tend to create discontent, whereas individuals may be satisfied with limited rewards as long as they are as good as what others are receiving.

Since most people who feel relatively deprived do not resort to violent action, aversive privation, like other forms of aversive treatment, is not in itself a sufficient cause of collective aggression. Additional social learning factors must be considered that determine whether discontent will take an aggressive form or some other behavioral expression. Using such a multideterminant approach, Gurr (30) examined the magnitude of civil disorder in Western nations as a function of three sets of factors. The first is the level of social discontent arising from economic decline, oppressive restrictions, and social inequities. The second factor is the traditional acceptance of force to achieve social change. Some societies disavow aggressive tactics, while others regard mass protests and *coups*

d'états as acceptable means of change. The third factor is the balance of coercive power between the system and the challengers as measured by amount of military, police, industrial, labor, and foreign support the protagonists can marshal on their side. The analysis reveals that when aggressive tactics are considered acceptable and challengers possess coercive power, they will use less extreme forms of collective aggression without requiring much discontent. Revolutionary violence, however, requires widespread discontent and strong coercive power by challengers, while tactical traditions are of less importance.

Aversive instigators of aggression have occupied a central role in psychological theorizing, often to the neglect of more important determinants; a great deal of human aggression, in fact, is prompted by anticipated positive consequences.

Here, the instigator is the pull of expected benefits, rather than the push of painful treatment. This positive source of motivation for aggression represents the second component in the motivational analysis in Figure 2.

During the process of socialization, people are trained to obey orders. By rewarding compliance and punishing disobedience, directives issued in the form of authoritative commands elicit obedient aggression. After this form of social control is established, legitimate authorities can secure obedient aggression from others, especially if the actions are presented as justified and necessary, and the issuers possess strong coercive power. As Snow (57) has perceptively observed, "When you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than in the name of rebellion" (p. 24).

In studies of obedient aggression, Milgram (47) and others (35, 44) have shown that well-meaning adults will administer increasingly severe shocks on command despite their victims' desperate pleas. Adults find it difficult to resist peer pressures calling for increasingly harmful actions just as they are averse to defying legitimized authority. Seeing others carrying out punitive orders calmly likewise increases obedient aggression (51).

It is less difficult to hurt people on command when their suffering is not visible and when causal actions seem physically or temporally remote from their deleterious effects. Mechanized forms of warfare, where masses of people can be put to death by destructive forces released remotely, illustrate such depersonalized aggression. When the injurious consequences of one's actions are fully evident, vicariously aroused distress and self-censure serve as restraining influences over aggressive conduct that is otherwise authoritatively sanctioned. Obedience declines as the harmful consequences of destructive acts become increasingly more salient and personalized (47). As the results of these and other studies show, it requires conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people to produce heinous deeds.

The third major feature of the social learning formulation concerns the conditions that sustain aggressive responding. It is amply documented in psychologi-

cal research that behavior is extensively regulated by its consequences. This principle applies equally to aggression. Injurious modes of response, like other forms of social behavior, can be increased, eliminated and reinstated by altering the effects they produce. Three forms of outcomes—external, vicarious, and self-produced—not only serve as separate sources of influence, but they interact in ways that weaken or enhance their effects on behavior.

Extrinsic rewards assume special importance in interpersonal aggression because such behavior, by its very nature, usually produces some costs among its diverse effects. People who get into fights, for example, will suffer pain and injury even though they eventually triumph over their opponents. Under non-coercive conditions, positive incentives are needed to overcome inhibitions arising from the aversive concomitants of aggression. The positive incentives take a variety of forms.

Aggression is often used by those lacking better alternatives because it is an effective means of securing desired tangible rewards. Ordinarily docile animals will fight when aggressive attacks produce food or drink (3, 67). Observation of children's interactions reveals that most of the assaultive actions of aggressors produce rewarding outcomes for them (49). Aggressive behavior is especially persistent when it is reinforced only intermittently, which is usually the case under the variable conditions of everyday life (68).

Aggressive styles of behavior are often adopted because they win approval and status rewards.

When people are commended for behaving punitively they become progressively more aggressive, whereas they display a relatively low level of aggression when it is not treated as praiseworthy (28, 58). Approval not only increases the specific aggressive responses that are socially reinforced but it tends to enhance other forms of aggression as well (27, 41, 56).

People are often treated aversively by others from which they seek relief. Coercive action that is not unduly hazardous is the most direct and quickest means of alleviating maltreatment, if only temporarily. Defensive forms of aggression are frequently reinforced by their capacity to terminate humiliating and painful treatment. Reinforcement through pain reduction is well documented in studies showing that children who are victimized but terminate the abuse by successful counteraggression eventually become highly aggressive in their behavior (49).

In the social learning analysis, defensive aggression is sustained to a greater extent by anticipated consequences than by its instantaneous effects. People will endure the pain of reprisals on expectations that their aggressive efforts will eventually remove deleterious conditions. Aggressive actions may also be partly maintained in the face of painful counterattack by anticipated costs of timidity. In aggression-oriented circles, failure to fight back can arouse fear of future victimization and humiliation. A physical pummeling may, therefore, be far less distressing than repeated social derision or increased likelihood of future abuse.

Punishing consequences that are observed or experienced directly convey information about the circumstances under which aggressive behavior is safe and when it is hazardous. Aggressive actions are therefore partly regulated on the basis of anticipated negative consequences. Being under cognitive and situational control, restraints arising from external threats vary in durability and in how widely they generalize beyond the prohibitive situations.

The effectiveness of punishment in controlling behavior is determined by a number of factors (4, 15). Of special importance are the benefits derived through aggressive actions and the availability of alternative means of securing desired goals. Other determinants of the suppressive power of punishment include the likelihood that aggression will be punished, and the nature, severity, timing, and duration of aversive consequences. In addition, the level of instigation to aggression and the characteristics of the prohibitive agents influence how aggressors will respond under threat of punishment.

When alternative means are available for people to get what they seek, aggressive modes of behavior that carry high risk of punishment are rapidly discarded. Aggression control through punishment becomes more problematic when aggressive actions are socially or tangibly rewarded, and alternative means of securing desired outcomes are either unavailable, less effective in producing results, or not within the capabilities of the aggressor. Punishment is not only precarious as an external inhibitor of intermittently rewarded behavior, but its frequent use can inadvertently promote aggression by modeling punitive modes of control (33).

*Vicarious reinforcement operates primarily
through its informative function.*

Since observed outcomes convey different types of information, they can have diverse behavioral effects. Models and observers often differ in distinguishable ways so that behavior considered approvable for one may be punishable for the other, depending on discrepancies in sex, age, and social status. When the same behavior produces unlike consequences for different members, observed rewards may not enhance the level of imitative aggressiveness (62).

When observed outcomes are judged personally attainable, they create incentive motivation. Seeing others' successes can function as a motivator by arousing in observers expectations that they can gain similar rewards for analogous performances. In addition, valuation of people and activities can be significantly altered on the basis of observed consequences. Ordinarily, observed punishment tends to devalue the models and their behavior, whereas the same models become a source of emulation when their actions are admired. However, aggressors may gain, rather than lose, status in the eyes of their peers when they are punished for a style of behavior valued by the group, or when they aggress against institutional practices that violate the professed values of society. It is for this reason that authoritative agencies are usually careful not to discipline challengers in ways that might martyr them.

Observed consequences can change observers' valuation of those who exercise power as well as of the recipients. Restrained and principled use of coercive power elicits respect. When societal agents misuse their power to reward and punish, they undermine the legitimacy of their authority and arouse opposition. Seeing inequitable punishment, rather than securing compliance, may foster aggressive reprisals. Indeed, activists sometimes attempt to rally supporters to their cause by selecting aggressive tactics calculated to provoke authorities to excessive countermeasures.

People are not simply reactors to external influences; through self-generated inducements and self-produced consequences they exercise influence over their own behavior.

In social learning theory, a self-system is not a psychic agent that controls behavior. Rather, it refers to cognitive structures that provide the referential standards against which behavior is judged, and a set of subfunctions for the perception, evaluation, and regulation of action (6, 9). Figure 3 presents a diagrammatic representation of three main subfunctions in the self-regulation of behavior by self-produced incentives. The first component concerns the selective observation of one's own behavior in terms of a number of relevant dimensions. Behavior produces self-reactions through a judgmental function relying on several subsidiary processes, which include referential comparison of perceived conduct to internal standards, valuation of the activities in which one is engaged, and the cognitive appraisal of the determinants of one's behavior. Performance appraisals set the occasion for self-produced consequences. Favorable judgments give rise to rewarding self-reactions, whereas unfavorable appraisals activate negative self-reactions.

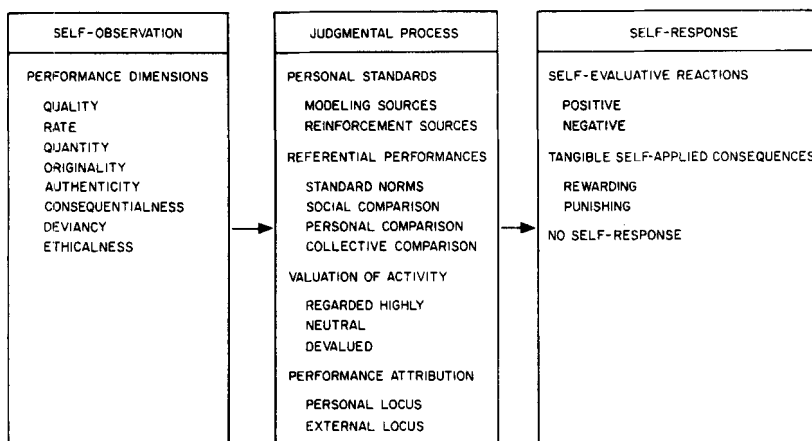


Figure 3: Component processes in the self-regulation of behavior by self-produced consequences

One can distinguish several ways in which self-generated consequences enter into the self-regulation of aggressive behavior. At one extreme are individuals who have adopted self-reinforcement codes that make aggressive behavior a source of personal pride. Such individuals readily engage in aggressive activities and derive enhanced feelings of self-worth from physical conquests (11, 65, 71). Lacking self-reprimands for hurtful conduct, they are deterred from cruel acts mainly by reprisal threats. Idiosyncratic self-systems of morality are not confined to individuals or fighting gangs. In aggressive cultures where prestige is closely tied to fighting prowess, members take considerable pride in aggressive exploits.

After ethical and moral standards of conduct are adopted, anticipatory self-condemning reactions for violating personal standards ordinarily serve as self-deterrents against reprehensible acts. Results of the study by Bandura and Walters (11) reveal how anticipatory self-reproach for repudiated aggression serves as a motivating influence to keep behavior in line with adopted standards. Adolescents who were compassionate in their dealing with others responded with self-disapproval, remorse, and attempts at reparation even when their aggressive activities were minor in nature. In contrast, assaultive boys experienced relatively few negative self-reactions over serious aggressive activities. These differential self-reactive patterns are corroborated by Perry and Bussey (50) in laboratory tests.

In the social learning analysis, moral people perform culpable acts through processes that disengage evaluative self-reactions from such conduct rather than due to defects in the development or the structure of their superegos (5).

Acquisition of self-regulatory capabilities does not create an invariant control mechanism within a person. Self-evaluative influences do not operate unless activated, and many situational dynamics influence their selective activation.

Self-detering consequences are likely to be activated most strongly when the causal connection between conduct and the detrimental effects it produces is unambiguous. There are various means, however, by which self-evaluative consequences can be dissociated from censurable behavior. Figure 4 shows the several points in the process at which the disengagement can occur.

One set of disengagement practices operates at the level of the behavior. People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. What is culpable can be made honorable through cognitive restructuring. In this process, reprehensible conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of moral ends. Over the years, much destructive and reprehensible conduct has been perpetrated by decent, moral people in the name of religious principles and righteous ideologies. Acting on moral or ideological imperative reflects not an unconscious defense mechanism, but a conscious offense mechanism.

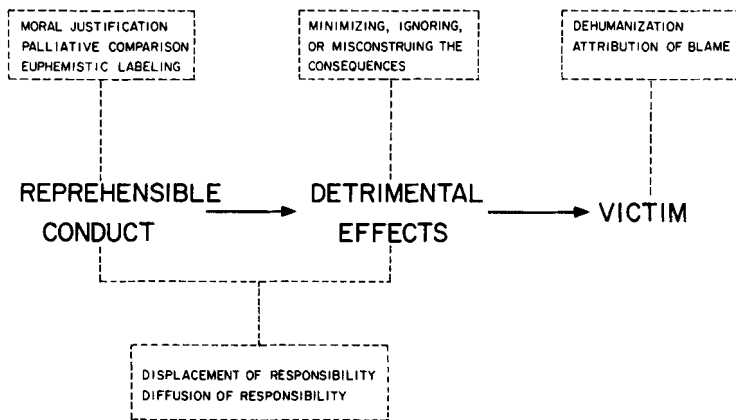


Figure 4: Mechanisms through which behavior is disengaged from self-evaluative consequences at different points in the behavioral process

Self-deplored acts can also be made righteous by contrasting them with flagrant inhumanities. The more outrageous the comparison practices, the more likely are one's reprehensible acts to appear trifling or even benevolent. Euphemistic language provides an additional convenient device for disguising reprehensible activities and according them a respectable status. Through convoluted verbiage pernicious conduct is made benign and those who engage in it are relieved of a sense of personal agency (25). Moral justifications and palliative characterizations are especially effective disinhibitors because they not only eliminate self-generated deterrents, but engage self-reward in the service of injurious behavior. What was morally unacceptable becomes a source of self-pride.

Another set of dissociative practices operates by obscuring or distorting the relationship between actions and the effects they cause. People will behave in highly punitive ways they normally repudiate if a legitimate authority acknowledges responsibility for the consequences of the conduct (23, 47). By displacing responsibility, people do not see themselves as personally accountable for their actions and are thus spared self-prohibiting reactions. They therefore act more aggressively when responsibility is obscured by a collective instrumentality (10).

The final set of disengagement practices operate at the level of the recipients of injurious effects. The strength of self-evaluative reactions partly depends on how the people toward whom actions are directed are viewed. Maltreatment of individuals who are regarded as subhuman or debased is less apt to arouse self-reproof than if they are seen as human beings with dignifying qualities (10, 72). Analysis of the cognitive concomitants of injurious behavior reveals that dehumanization fosters a variety of self-exonerating maneuvers (10).

Many conditions of contemporary life are conducive to dehumanization. Bureaucratization, automation, urbanization, and high social mobility lead people to relate to each other in anonymous, impersonal ways. In addition,

social practices that divide people into in-group and out-group members produce human estrangement that fosters dehumanization. Strangers can be more easily cast as unfeeling beings than can personal acquaintances.

Of equal theoretical and social significance is the power of humanization to counteract injurious conduct. Studies examining this process reveal that, even under conditions that ordinarily weaken self-deterrents, it is difficult for people to behave cruelly toward people when they are characterized in ways that personalize and humanize them (10).

Attributing blame to one's victims is still another expedient that can serve self-exonerative purposes. Victims get blamed for bringing suffering on themselves, or extraordinary circumstances are invoked to vindicate irresponsible conduct. By blaming others, one's own actions are excusable. People are socially aided in dehumanizing and blaming groups held in disfavor by perjorative stereotyping and indoctrination.

These practices will not instantaneously transform a gentle person into a brutal aggressor. Rather, the change is usually achieved through a gradual desensitization process in which participants may not fully recognize the marked changes they are undergoing. Initially, individuals are prompted to perform aggressive acts they can tolerate without excessive self-censure. After their discomfort and self-reproof are diminished through repeated performance, the level of aggression is progressively increased in this manner until eventually gruesome deeds, originally regarded as abhorrent, can be performed without much distress.

Zimbardo (72) explains reduction of restraints over aggression in terms of deindividuation. Deindividuation is an internal state characterized by a loss of self-consciousness and self-evaluation coupled with a diminished concern for negative evaluation from others. According to this view, the altered perception of self and others weakens cognitive control over behavior, thus facilitating intense impulse actions.

Although deindividuation and social learning theory posit some overlapping determinants and processes of internal disinhibition, they differ in certain important respects. Deindividuation views intense aggression as resulting mainly from loss of cognitive control. Social learning encompasses a broader range of disinhibitory factors designed to provide a unified theory for explaining both impulsive and principled aggressive conduct. As indicated earlier, people frequently engage in violent activities not because of reduced self-control but because their cognitive skills and self-control are enlisted all too well through moral justifications and self-exonerative devices in the service of destructive causes. The massive threats to human welfare are generally brought about by deliberate acts of principle rather than by unrestrained acts of impulse. It is the principled resort to aggression that is of greatest social concern but most ignored in psychological theorizing and research.

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